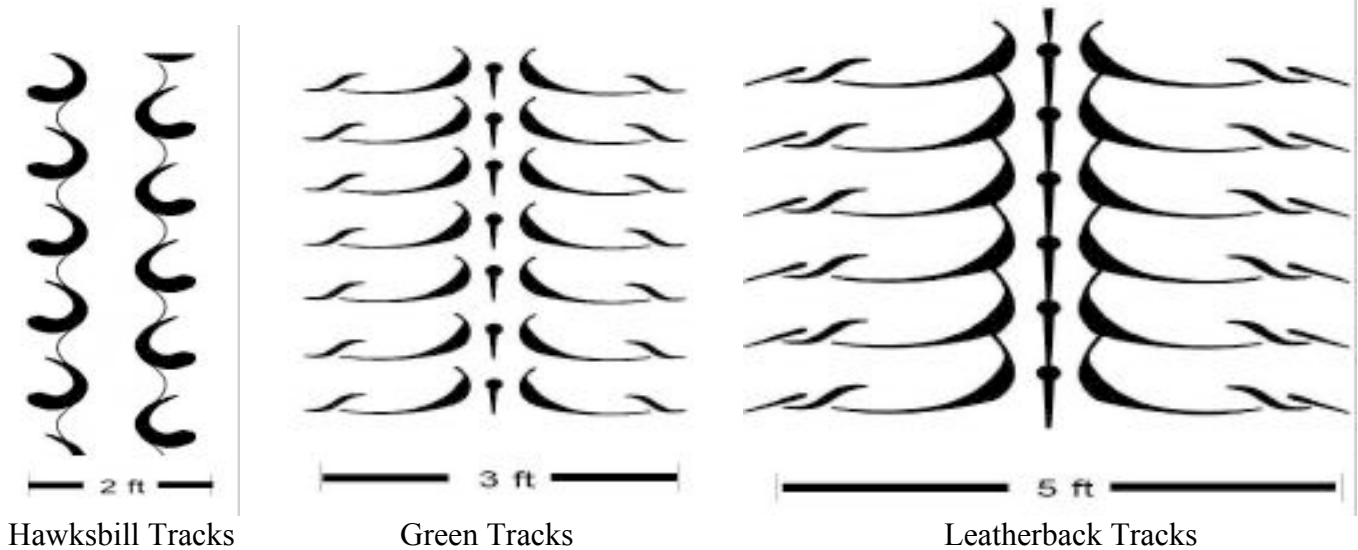




Department of Planning and Natural Resources
Division of Fish and Wildlife
U.S.V.I. Animal Fact Sheet #17
SEA TURTLE NESTING



Tracks of sea turtles that commonly nest in the U.S. Virgin Islands and surrounding islands.



All sea turtles lay their eggs in nests that they dig on sandy beaches. The nests are dug with their rear flippers. The depth of the nest is dependent on the length of the rear flippers. When the female turtle can no longer reach the sand at the bottom of the nest with its flippers, the nest is deep enough. The turtle then begins to drop the eggs into the nest. The eggs are soft shelled so they do not break when they drop on top of each other.

When the female has laid all her eggs, she covers the nest with sand and returns to the sea. Turtles do not exhibit any parental care. They may never see their hatchlings.

The temperature at which the eggs are incubated determines the sex of sea turtles. Warmer temperatures mean more females hatch than males. Colder temperatures mean more males hatch than females.

The hatchlings emerge by breaking open the shell and “swimming” up through the sand covering the nest. They find their own way to the beach and into the water. The hatchlings instinctively head for areas with brighter light,

which once was the open ocean. On beaches with no artificial lights or towns in the distance, star and moon light shining down and reflecting off the waters surface is brighter than the inland vegetated areas. Today, lights shining on the beaches guide hatchlings inland where they are run over by cars, eaten by cats, dogs and pigs as well as other animals looking for easy food. It is very important that the hatchlings make it to the water as quickly as possible. So please turn off lights that shine on and near the beach.

Sea turtles nest throughout the US Virgin Islands. They have been recorded nesting on nearly every sandy beach in the territory.

Leatherback turtles, the biggest of the VI turtles, nest in the middle of large sandy beaches, that are not blocked by reefs and have deep water nearby. Leatherback tracks are distinctive because of their large size. Tracks may be 5 to 7 feet wide. They actively disguise the location of their nests often making the beach look like a bulldozer had been driving on it.

Green turtle nests are found high up on the beach near the vegetation line. They frequently

dig nests in the short coastal beach vegetation. Their nests characteristically are large cone shaped pits about 1 to 1.5 feet deep.

Hawksbills nest far up on the beach. They generally nest underneath the branches of coastal trees and scrub. The Hawksbill is also the only turtle in the VI that uses an alternating gait (the same way a dog or cat walks) when on land. All other sea turtles pull-push themselves along the sand (all 4 flippers move at the same time). This can be used to determine if a turtle track belongs to a Hawksbill or Green turtle.

Table of basic nesting and reproductive parameters for sea turtles found nesting in the territory.

	Hawksbill	Green	Leatherback	Loggerhead
# Eggs	140	136	116	100-126
Days to hatch	60 ave.*	64 ave. (54-88)	63 ave. (55-75)	62 ave. (53-68)
Hatching Success	80%	~80%	55-75%	55-73%
Years between Nesting	2-3	2-4	2-3	2-3
Inter Nesting Interval	14 days	13 days	10 days	14 days
Nests per season	4.5 ave. (12 max)	2.5 ave. (7 max)	6 ave. (11 max)	4.1 ave. (7 max)

- ave. = average

What you can do to help

1. If you see any turtle nesting or hatching events, please write down the date, time and location you saw the turtles then call the Division of Fish and Wildlife at 340-772-1955 (on St. Croix) or 340-775-6762 (on St. Thomas/St. John) to report the event.
2. Hatchlings can crawl to the water themselves. If you see hatchlings making their way into the water, please let them complete the journey themselves.
3. Please make an extra effort to keep plastic out of the marine environment.
4. Turtles, especially hatchlings, will head toward the brightest light source on the beach. This used to be star and moon light shining on the ocean, but today it may be street or building lights. If you have security or safety lights near the beach use low intensity sodium vapor lights and build shades around the light so the beach is not directly illuminated. If possible turn off lights that shine on and

toward the beach, when hatchlings are emerging.

5. Do not take flash pictures or shine lights directly toward the turtles - it will disorient them. Like us, turtle eyes will maintain the ghost image of the flash, only the hatchlings see this as a bright area and will crawl toward it.
6. If hatchlings emerge during the day and get caught in vegetation, you can help by keeping them safe from predators and if they are heading inland, guiding them to the waters edge.
7. If you see hatchlings at night in parking lots, roads and other places where they are heading away from the ocean, please gently pick them up and take them to a nearby dark beach and release them at the waters edge.
8. If you see a nesting turtle do not crowd around it and do not harass it. You may observe nesting from a distance by staying behind the front flippers of the turtle. No flash photography.
9. Occasionally turtles will nest during the day. If you see a daytime nesting sea turtle, please call the Division of Fish and Wildlife immediately.
10. If you see someone harassing a sea turtle or poaching a nest, call the local police (911) or the local Division of Environmental Enforcement, STT 340-774-3320, STX 340-773-5774.
11. For more information on this and other animals in the Virgin Islands please visit our web site at: www.vifishandwildlife.com

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ON OUR NATIVE ANIMALS CONTACT

DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

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